



W Heberden

[Frontispiece

HEBERDEN SOCIETY

DOCTOR WILLIAM HEBERDEN*

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The tall and spare, yet stately, figure of Dr. William Heberden must have been a familiar sight to many Londoners of the 18th century. That period was rich in great physicians, and in London the leading practitioners were at first Radcliffe and Mead, to be followed by Fothergill, Lettsom, Baillie, and Heberden. Heberden was second to none, and although he held no hospital appointment and made no discovery, his contribution to medical progress was considerable. Samuel Johnson, who was his patient, called him the last of the great physicians, *ultimus Romanorum*, although he might be regarded more correctly as the first of the modern physicians, so fresh and unbiassed was his outlook.

At that time London was the centre of practice, just as Edinburgh was the centre of teaching. Heberden was still a student at Cambridge when in 1728 Alexander Monro returned from Leyden to found the Edinburgh Medical School. Born in 1710, William Heberden died in 1801, and thus his long life-span almost coincided with the 18th century. Our knowledge of his domestic life is scanty. He was born at Southwark, the son of Richard Heberden, and was educated at the grammar school of St. Saviour, and from 1724 at Cambridge, where he became a fellow of St. John's College in 1731. For ten years after graduating M.D. in 1739 he practised in Cambridge, and taught *materia medica*†; then he removed to London, where for many years he conducted a large and fashionable practice, living first at Cecil Street, Strand, and later at 79 Pall Mall, with a country residence at Datchet, near Windsor. He was twice married, and had seven sons and three daughters from whom a succession of physicians and clergymen is descended, but the only member of his family to survive him was a son of the second marriage, usually known as William Heberden the Younger.

Our patron retired at the comparatively early age of 72, and such, in brief, is his biography, so far as it is known. That he was a classical scholar of distinction is evident from the fact that he edited some of the plays of Euripides. He had many friends in the field of literature, some of whom were his patients. Dr. Johnson we have already mentioned; George Crabbe described him as "tender, ardent, and kind", and the poet Cowper wrote of him:

Virtuous and faithful Heberden, whose skill
Attempts no task it cannot well fulfil.

Among his friends was a certain Dr. Conyers Middleton, who had composed

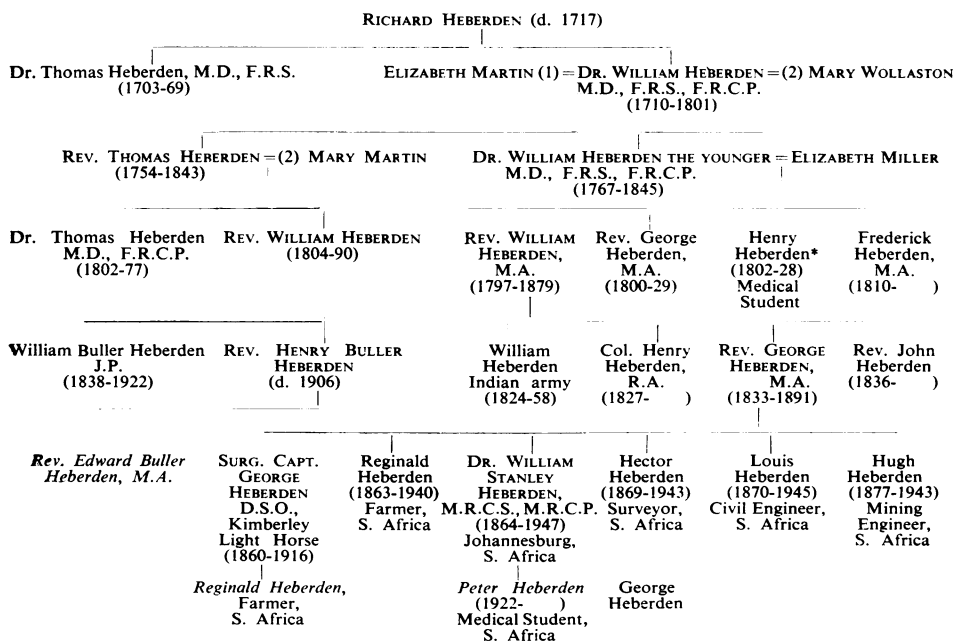
* Read before the Heberden Society in Edinburgh on May 10, 1951.

† The cabinet of *materia medica* used by Heberden in teaching that subject is still preserved in the Library of St. John's College, Cambridge.

an unorthodox work entitled "The Inefficiency of Prayer" which was left unpublished at his death. When the widow consulted Heberden regarding its publication, he found a publisher who offered £150 for the manuscript; thereupon Heberden sent a cheque for £200 to the widow and consigned the work to the fire, since he considered that, if published, it would be injurious to the memory of the writer. The action was characteristic of the man, and he deserves to be remembered not only for his learning, but for those qualities of modesty, sympathy, and kindness which he possessed in full measure.

Heberden's earliest published work was a tract written in 1745, while he was still teaching at Cambridge, entitled "Antitheriaca; An Essay on Mithradatum and Theriaca", pointing out the uselessness of those remedies. The poison antidote used by Mithradates, king of Pontus (who died in 63 B.C.), consisted of 20 leaves of rue, 1 grain of salt, and 2 dried figs. Celsus (A.D. 30) mentions 38 ingredients. Nero's physician, Andromachus, added viper's flesh to the remedy and called it Theriac. The Theriac of the Pharmacopoeia of the Royal College of Physicians of London, dated 1724, contains 62 ingredients, but in spite of Dr. Heberden's exposure it remained an official remedy until 1788. In 1752, shortly after his removal to London, Heberden was admitted a Fellow of the Royal Society, and contributed four papers to the *Philosophical Transactions*: "On the Effects of Lightning", "On Rain-gauges", "On Salt found in Teneriffe", and "An Account of a very large Calculus".

SELECT TABLE OF THE HEBERDEN FAMILY



* Died through infection of a cut hand at a *post-mortem*.

For the *Medical Transactions* of the Royal College of Physicians he wrote other papers, of which " Observations Upon the Ascarides ", " Of Night-Blindness or Nyctalopia ", " Of the Diseases of the Liver ", " Remarks on the Pulse ", and " Account of the Noxious Effects of Some Fungi " are only a few.

Throughout his many years of practice, William Heberden was in the habit of making notes " relating to the nature and cure of disease ", and of transcribing and arranging them at the end of every month. In this manner he collected a vast mass of material, written in Latin and English, and from it compiled, in 1782, his " Commentaries on the History and Cure of Diseases ", which he entrusted to the care of his son, to be published after his death. The book appeared in 1802, and remains to this day one of the most useful and readable of medical classics. In it are described the *Digitum Nodi* which we call " Heberden's Nodes ", little hard knobs, frequently seen upon the finger, and continuing for life. Even more worthy of mention is Heberden's classic description of " Pectoris Dolor ":

a disorder of the breast marked with strong and peculiar symptoms, considerable for the kind of danger belonging to it, and not extremely rare. The seat of it, the sense of strangling, and the anxiety with which it is attended, may make it not improperly be called *angina pectoris*.

The disease had already been described in 1632 by the Earl of Clarendon, who spoke then of the death of his father:

the pain in his arm seizing upon him, he fell down dead, without the least motion of any limb.

Naturally, we wish to know what Heberden has to say of Rheumatism, which he defines as " a common name for many aches and pains, which have yet no peculiar appellation, though owing to very different causes ". He describes two varieties, " acute and chronical ", telling us that " both kinds attack indiscriminately males and females, rich and poor ".

Heberden's description of " chicken pox " was opportune, at a time when it was often confused with small pox. Edward Jenner's discovery of vaccination in 1796 had not yet met with general adoption. At that time, too, malaria was still prevalent in England. Heberden shows that the quartan fever is more serious than the tertian, and more resistant to treatment by Peruvian bark. Another topical description deals with " malignant sore throat ", which occurred in epidemic form and was described in 1748 by Fothergill. Heberden regarded it as a form of scarlet fever, remarking that " both are names for the same disorder, and both are epidemical at the same time ". One of the longest and most interesting chapters deals with jaundice, and the shortest dismisses hernia in a single sentence:

Ruptures require no other remedy than a truss.

But no extracts from the Commentaries can be adequate; the clinical pictures, clear and concise, must be studied and pondered. It is not surprising that the book had an enormous popularity although good copies are now rare.

The portrait of Heberden here reproduced* hangs in the Royal College of

* The reproduction, from an engraving by J. Thomson, is included in T. J. Pettigrew's *Biographical Memoirs* (1839).

Physicians. Sir William Beechey, R.A., a famous artist of the day, went down to Windsor in 1796 to paint it, but he forgot his canvas, and it is said that he painted it on one of his subject's shirts !

Heberden's son, William Heberden the Younger (1767-1845), was also a distinguished physician, although his fame, as so often happens, was overshadowed by his father's achievement. He lived to the age of 78, but retired early from practice and devoted his attention to theology and to the education of his nine children. Nevertheless, he attained eminence sufficient to warrant his appointment as Physician to St. George's Hospital in 1793, and to King George III in 1809. The King's illness dragged on for years, with Matthew Baillie and Heberden in attendance, and Francis Willis as mental consultant, a collaboration recorded by a contemporary in this doggerel:

The King employs the doctors daily—
Willis, Heberden and Baillie;
All extremely clever men—
Baillie, Willis, Heberden,
But doubtful which most sure to kill is—
Baillie, Heberden, or Willis.

He published "Observations on the Increase and Decrease of different Diseases" (1801), and "Morborum puerilium epitome" (1804), Eng. trans., (1805), both interesting and useful works.

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